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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 0158
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT IMMEDIATE 0162
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY IMMEDIATE 0082
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE IMMEDIATE
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT IMMEDIATE 0167
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK IMMEDIATE 0049
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001498

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SUBJECT: ELECTION COMMISSION DISCUSSES ELECTORAL REFORM,
VOTER LIST PREPARATION

REF: DHAKA 1472

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. An easing of the ban on indoor politics was a necessary precondition for the Commission to begin its dialogue with the political parties, the Election Commission told the Charge d'Affaires in a recent meeting. Calling the emerging split within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) a "dangerous situation," the Chief Election Commissioner said the only solution was for the two factions to sit down and work things out. The Commissioners also expressed skepticism about the role of Bangladeshi non-governmental organizations in the electoral reform process, stating that an independent monitoring of the registration process was unnecessary. END SUMMARY.

PRAISE FOR VOTER REGISTRATION PROJECT

12. (U) On September 9, Charge d'Affaires a.i., USAID Mission Director and POLOFF (notetaker) met with the Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda, and the two regular commissioners, Brigadier General (ret.) M. Sakhawat Hossain and Muhammad Sohul Hossain. Acknowledging the Commissioners, work over the past several months, including the successful start of the project to create a new voter registration with photographs, the CDA, a.i. reiterated earlier offers of USG assistance. The Commissioners said they would be in touch with the Mission once they have a clearer picture of needs beyond the immediate UNDP-coordinated voter registration project.

ELECTIONS COMMISSION ON "FIRM FOOTING"

13. (C) With the elections roadmap now public and the technology for the registration program in place, Huda said the Commissioners finally felt as though they were on a firm footing. The Commission faces many challenges. Many voters do not know their exact date of birth, for example, and cultural norms mean that conservative (largely rural) women often will not say aloud the name of their husband, which complicates registration since this means someone else must accompany to provide the husband's name (information needed to register). On a positive note, as the data entry specialists have become more proficient, the average amount of time required to input each voter's data has decreased from six to seven minutes in

August to four to five minutes today. This has put them ahead of schedule in some areas of the country. Huda also noted that the Commission had received donations of laptops from private companies that were helping bridge a gap in government procurement. (COMMENT: On September 12 the media reported the Election Commission had to re-issue a tender for 8,000 laptop computers for the registration project after a government procurement panel found "anomalies" in the original tender from July. Huda seemed confident the private contribution would ensure the registration project did not fall behind schedule. END COMMENT.)

"WE MUST HAVE ELECTIONS BY DECEMBER 2008"

14. (C) Huda emphasized "we must have elections by December 2008," underscoring "there is no going back on that date." He added, however, that the December 2008 deadline was an "outer limit" and opined that if registration continued at the current pace, elections could be held even earlier.

BAN ON INDOOR POLITICS

15. (C) The Commissioners agreed with the CDA that the ban on indoor politics needed to be lifted for parties to meet and discuss electoral and party reform. Huda said the Commission had held numerous discussions with the Chief Advisor on this issue. When the Election Commission prepared its electoral roadmap in July, the only change made by the government was to push from August to September the start of Election Commission dialogue with the political parties. At the time, Huda took this as a clear sign the government was prepared to

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lift the ban in September. (NOTE: Later that same day the Chief Advisor gave a speech in which he announced a relaxation of the ban. END NOTE.) (Reftel.)

COMMISSION PREPARING FOR DIALOGUE

16. (C) Once the indoor politics ban is lifted, Huda said he believed the political parties would be eager to sit down and speak with the Commission. Huda estimated that there are over 130 political parties in Bangladesh. The Commission will meet with only those (about thirty) that meet one of three criteria: the party has had at least one member of parliament elected in one of the eight parliamentary elections in Bangladesh since 1972; or the party has won at least two percent of the national vote in one of those elections; or the party has offices in at least 50 percent of the districts in the country. The Commission is scheduled to begin its dialogue with the various parties on September 12. The dialogue is expected to continue into November.

BNP DIVISIONS PUT PRESSURE ON COMMISSION

17. (C) Huda called the emerging internal split in the BNP "very dangerous, a critical situation." According to the Election Commission's criteria for consulting with the parties, they will only sit down with one party faction. When asked how the Commission will decide which faction to recognize, Huda said this was an issue the BNP factions needed to resolve amongst themselves, noting the Commission would not be engaged in this process. He was dismissive of statements by some loyalists to former Prime Minister Zia that they would refuse to meet the Commission while Zia remained in jail, calling it "just a strategy." (COMMENT: It is interesting for Huda to take this line since key political observers believe the government and military are encouraging Mannan Bhuiyan's faction of the BNP. END COMMENT.)

WORK WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS PROBLEMATIC

¶18. (C) The CDA, a.i. asked about recent public criticisms of non-governmental organizations NGOs) attributed to the Election Commission. (NOTE: In mid-August, Commissioner Sakhawat Hossain publicly criticized the NGO members of the Asia Foundation-organized Elections Working Group for "stealing" and "wasting" donor funds. END NOTE.) Sakhawat confided that the Asia Foundation had provided the Commissioners with lists of NGOs throughout the country working on an Election Working Group voter information program. When the Commissioners tried to verify the work these NGOs were doing in the field, they could not find them. "They were supposed to be doing a job, and they weren't," said Sakhawat.

¶19. (C) Huda said that as a result of this negative experience, the Commission tried to "bring some order" to the NGOs, namely by negotiating a memorandum of understanding that clearly laid out for the Election Working Group NGOs two tasks: voter motivation, and distributing registration information and forms. The Commissioners said things were now "back on track."

¶10. (C) While the Commissioners were receptive to the idea of NGOs helping with registration, they felt projects by NGOs to observe the registration process were "unnecessary." The CDA, a.i. and USAID Mission Director mentioned the proposed USAID-funded program of the International Republican Institute (IRI) to work through the local elections NGO JANIPOP to evaluate the registration process. "It would not be good for them to monitor the process," said Shahabad. "The process is already transparent, so this is not necessary." Moreover, Huda noted that NGOs in Bangladesh all have partisan affiliations. He blasted the head of JANIPOP, Dr. Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah, as a "known Awami League supporter." (COMMENT: Kalimullah in the past has often been accused of being an BNP sympathizer. END COMMENT.)

¶11. (C) Huda mentioned that one local NGO, BROTEE, had submitted a proposal for reviewing the accuracy of the voter

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list. The Commission thought this would be a "constructive" initiative and encouraged NGOs to focus efforts on making sure that registration is complete. Once the final lists are posted for review across the country, the commissioners said they would welcome assistance to identify any missed voters, gaps, etc. (NOTE: BROTEE has been quietly blacklisted by the international donor community after the Dutch government reported BROTEE had misused funding for a validation program regarding the old voter list. END NOTE.)

COMMENT: ELECTIONS GENERALLY ON TRACK

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¶12. (C) COMMENT. The commissioners stressed that the registration process is on track and even hinted at the possibility of moving up the elections timeframe. In addition, the call for a lifting of the ban on indoor politics (albeit only partially) was realized later that day by the Chief Advisor. In spite of their stated willingness to work with NGOs (as long as the NGOs are helping advance the Commission's agenda - educating and motivating voters), the Commission's mistrust of NGOs is clear. In addition, the commissioners' assertion that monitoring of voter registration is not needed because the system is transparent reflects the same lack of awareness of the importance of strategic communications that we have seen in other parts of the caretaker government. END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) Embassy will continue to engage the Commission in discussion on election preparations, including what role NGOs might play in this process. We are planning technical visits to different areas of the country to observe the voter registration process.

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